

At Baker McKenzie, Family Goes Beyond Blood

By Mark Curriden – (Sept. 4, 2017) – Justin Whittenburg had a few hours last Monday to gather his most important belongings.

He lives in the Sienna Plantation area on the south side of Houston, an area that went under mandatory evacuation as the unrelenting rain from Hurricane Harvey pelted down, causing a threatening swell in the Brazos River that runs along Whittenburg's neighborhood, separated from the homes only by a levee that in normal circumstances brings comfort.

As scary as the process was, it made Whittenburg realize how little of his material possessions he truly valued compared to the immaterial: family, friends, pets, memories.

"At the end of the day, it was a relatively easy process," Whittenburg said. "There are only a few things you care about that are material. You care about some pictures, and that's really probably it. Everything else at the end of the day can be replaced, so you load up your family and everything important to you, grab your pets and leave."



Justin Whittenburg

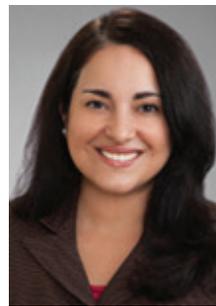
Fortunately, Whittenburg, a corporate lawyer at Baker McKenzie, had many options when he and his family evacuated their home. Numerous colleagues offered up their homes as a place to stay.

"It is a huge relief to know you have that kind of support system,"

Whittenburg said. "For us, it was really troubling to think about what if we didn't have that support system.

Baker McKenzie is among the numerous law firms providing deep support to Houston employees affected by Hurricane Harvey.

Beyond getting cash immediately to those who were left with nothing from the storm, Baker McKenzie lawyers have supported one another in ways such as ripping out carpet, doing laundry for colleagues whose homes were affected – even helping one colleague's daughter get to her brother's wedding.



Celina Joachim

"I'm so proud to work for people who really care about each other," said Celina Joachim, a labor and employment partner in the firm's Houston office. "The outpouring of support we're seeing" is remarkable, she said, not just locally, but colleagues elsewhere, "checking on you and wanting to know, 'What can

we send down'" or what they should gather through their church's donation drive.

Fortunately for Whittenburg, his house remained dry. But others at the firm were not so lucky.

Jonathan Newton, the managing partner of Baker McKenzie's Houston office, said of the roughly 100 lawyers and staff in Houston, several employees were severely affected by the storm, some losing everything. One employee had to evacuate on short notice, leaving her cats behind. Someone was able to later retrieve her cats for her, but everything else was gone.

"The waters just rose and she had to leave the house immediately," Newton said. "Her car is gone, house is gone, belongings are gone. She has nothing more right now than the clothes on her back. It's just incredibly difficult to imagine."

The firm has also helped Houston relatives of faraway firm employees.

Newton was in Chicago for meetings on Monday when one of the firm's management committee >

members there said his daughter had just moved to Houston to attend Rice University the Thursday before Harvey hit. His son was getting married in Minnesota the following weekend.



Jonathan Newton

Given the airport closures, the daughter could not fly and did not have a car. Even if she did, she wouldn't be comfortable driving anything other than an SUV, given the rising waters.

“A partner named Rick Hammett said, ‘I have my car parked at my daughter’s house in Houston. Do you think she’d want that? It’s a Land Rover,’” Newton recalled.

With the help of Hammett, the Chicago partner’s daughter was able to pick up the car and, through his directions, take the backroads to Austin and catch a flight there to Minnesota.

“We have a term here at Baker McKenzie that we’re a culture of friendship,” Newton said. “This was the most perfect example. Here’s this poor young woman who had literally moved to Houston the Thursday before the storm; she was probably regretting her decision. I was just really proud of my partner (Hammett) that he was able to do this.”

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